

Table 2 ASD Specific Approaches

Interactive Approaches	Emphasis is placed on assisting the child in developing relationships and engaging in reciprocal communication through structuring naturalistic and incidental learning and teaching contexts.
Communicative Approaches	Children's communication skills are specifically targeted, promoted and developed through the use of approaches such as the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS), the LAMH manual signing system, and/or the use of real objects, symbols, pictures, photographs drawings and written words.
Discrete Approaches TEACCH	The Treatment and Education of Autistic and related Communication handicapped CHildren (TEACCH) approach is based on the rationale that children with ASDs progress better in structured rather than in unstructured environments and incorporates a physical organisation of the environment, visual schedules, work-systems and task organisation.
Social Stories	Social Stories are designed to enable the child to cope with social situations, which he/she finds difficult. They are visual, identify relevant cues, provide easily accessible accurate information for the child and describe expected behaviours. Role-play and video may be used to enhance this process.
Integration Approaches	Integration is used as the learning medium and children are taught to directly participate in activities with their non-ASD peers. Buddy-systems, circle of friends approaches and social stories are successfully used to promote this process. The importance of providing mainstream peers with accurate age-appropriate ASD-awareness information in inclusive settings is stressed.
Behavioural Approaches	Behavioural approaches originate from Skinner's work in the 1950s and focus on modifying and shaping children's behaviour. The behavioural techniques of reinforcement, shaping, promoting and prompt-fading underpin the programme.

INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY

Computers have features that distinctively appeal to children with ASDs (Murray, 1997). Information and communication technology (ICT) may be used to support all areas of the curriculum and to meet children's needs associated with the triad of impairments. It is important to ensure that children are seated comfortably and appropriately when engaged in ICT activities. Computers are rule-governed and predictable, context free, enable safe-error making and provide possibilities for verbal and non-verbal communication. However the over use of computers should be avoided as some children exhibit a tendency to become obsessed with particular programmes, which can interfere with their learning. Concealing the computer and incorporating the computer in the child's daily work schedule are effective strategies for controlling computer access.

STAFF DEVELOPMENT

Staff should be facilitated in availing of opportunities to engage in staff development and training that enables them to effect a combined-skills approach to meeting the needs of children with ASDs. Schools' attention is directed to Circular 0001/2007, Circular 0002/2007, Circular 0003/2007 and the Special Education Support Service.

CONCLUSION

It is apparent from the evaluation of educational provision for children with ASDs that significant progress has been made since autism was given recognition as a discrete disability category in 1998. Schools are proactive and successful in enabling children with ASDs access appropriate education and achieve their full potential. The imagination, commitment and skill of individual teachers have contributed greatly to the high quality of educational provision that is available for children with ASDs. Finally in providing education for children with ASDs, important insights can be gained from the children themselves as the following poem written by Philip Aston, a seven-year old child with ASD demonstrates (Aston, 1996).

How I Got to Keep Listening

I got to keep listening
But I keep missing the words
Maybe I could sit at the front of the carpet
That will be a little bit louder

Mrs. Hirst talks to me
And I got to think
I thought 'it's hard'
But Mrs. Hirst thinks it's easy.

Maybe I only got small ears
And I got to keep them on
That's how
I got to keep listening.

As we continue to develop and improve the quality of education for children with ASDs, we can usefully adopt Philip's advice and keep listening.

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An Evaluation of Educational Provision For Children with Autistic Spectrum Disorders

A Report by the Inspectorate of the Department of Education and Science 2006

Emer Ring, Divisional Inspector, Department of Education and Science, describes the recent evaluation of educational provision for children with autistic spectrum disorders and suggests practical school-based strategies and resources for teachers in meeting children's needs.



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AUTISTIC SPECTRUM DISORDERS

Significant developments have occurred since the Government announcement in 1998 that children with autism were to be recognised as a distinct group for special educational provision (Department of Education and Science, (DES) 1998). The Task Force on Autism was launched by the Minister for Education and Science, Dr Michael Woods TD, in 2002 and the terms of reference included reviewing the existing range of educational provision and support services available to children with ASDs, assessing the adequacy of educational provision and services, considering the requirement for an associated range of provision, and making recommendations to ensure the provision of an appropriate, effective and efficient service. The report of the Task Force was published in 2001 and made a series of recommendations in relation to policy and practice concerning educational approaches to meeting the needs of children with ASDs (DES, 2001). The DES continues to develop policy and practice with reference to these recommendations.

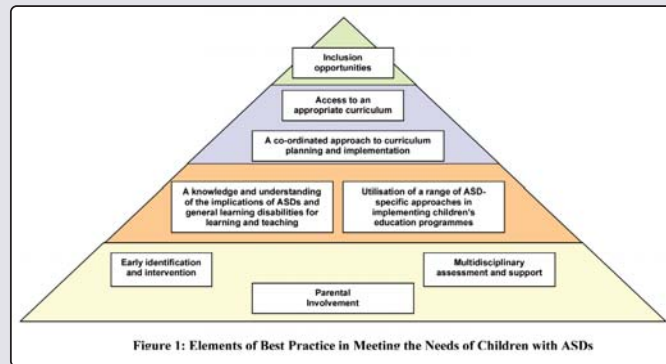
Autistic spectrum disorders (ASDs) are identified by a triad of impairments in social interaction, patterns of communication and flexibility of thought and imagination (DES, 2001). It has been suggested that an additional dimension related to difficulties experienced by children in processing sensory information might also be added to the triad (Autism Working Group, 2002a; Jones, 2002; Bogdashina, 2006). In addition, it is important to remember that some seventy-five per cent of children with ASDs are within the range of general learning disability (Ireland, 1993). It is acknowledged that, because of the nature of ASDs, it may be difficult to secure a precise assessment of a child's particular level of cognitive functioning (DES, 2001). However, it is clear from recent literature that the severity of ASDs and the level of general learning disability form two separate dimensions, which have to be explicitly considered when planning learning and teaching programmes for individual children (Peeters, 1997; Jordan, 2001; Autism Working Group, 2002b). According to the Task Force on Autism prevalence rates of individuals affected with ASDs are estimated to be in the region of 56 per 10,000 of the general population (DES, 2001).

It is clear that while children with ASDs have many traits in common with children who do not have ASDs, they also exhibit a distinctive style of thinking and learning. While all children with ASDs have features in common, they have diverse individual profiles that necessitate an individualised approach to meeting their needs.

EVALUATION PROCESS

Five categories of educational provision for children with ASDs were evaluated by the Inspectorate over the two-year period 2002-2004. The aims of the evaluation were to identify, acknowledge and affirm good practice, promote continuing improvement in the quality of education for children with ASDs, promote self-evaluation and continuous development by schools and staff-members, provide an assurance of quality with regard to educational provision for children with ASDs and contribute to future policy development.

The final composite report entitled An Evaluation of Educational Provision for Children with Autistic Spectrum Disorders was published in April 2006. An extensive literature review was conducted as part of the evaluation and concluded that there was no definitive evidence to support the exclusive use of a single teaching approach to meet the varied needs of children with ASDs and their families. The review of educational approaches suggested that the following elements in Figure 1. represent best practice in meeting children's needs.



PRACTICAL SCHOOL-BASED STRATEGIES EMERGING FROM THE EVALUATION

While there were some clear differences between the varied settings that were evaluated, for example in children's access to a broad curriculum, in the range of teaching approaches being used and in teachers' qualifications, there were many features in common. The following areas emerged as being of particular significance in meeting the needs of children with ASDs.

CURRICULUM ACCESS

The goals of the Primary Curriculum are designed to foster each child's individual identity in a holistic manner through nurturing the spiritual, moral, cognitive, emotional, imaginative, aesthetic, social and physical dimensions of development. All children with ASDs benefit from accessing a broad and relevant curriculum that addresses the triad of impairments, accommodates the special educational needs of the child arising from a general learning disability or other co-occurring difficulty, attends to developmental and adaptive needs, addresses the management of behaviour that interferes with children's learning, provides curricular experiences that are concerned with the holistic development of each child and uses a range of teaching methodologies and approaches. The significance of the triad of impairments, sensory sensitivities and general learning disability for curriculum delivery is illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1	
Traits particular to ASDs	Implications of these traits for learning and teaching
Impairments in social interaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Literal thinkers • Confused by the rules that govern social behaviour • Require direct teaching in social skills • Need to structure opportunities for the child to use social skills in different situations • Awareness of the difficulties for the child inherent in less structured situations, such as break and lunch time, and in transition between lessons
Impairments in language and communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The child needs support in understanding the purpose and value of communication • Attention needs to be directed towards teaching the social aspects of language, e.g. turn-taking • Direct teaching of gestures, facial expression, vocal intonation, and body language • Use of visual material or signing to support and facilitate the child's communicative initiations and responses • Providing precise instructions for the child to follow.
Impairments in imagination, with a restricted range of behaviour, activities, and interests	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The child must be helped to cope with new and varying activities • Pre-empting the child's anxiety, which results from being presented with unstructured or unfamiliar situations without prior warning or explanation • Devising and implementing a structured play programme
Additional difficulties: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sensory and perceptual sensitivities • Fine or gross motor control problems • Eating, drinking or sleeping irregularities • Inability to block out distractions • Inappropriate eye contact • Poor organisational skills • Difficulties in managing time and completing work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adjustments must be made to the classroom to deal with the child's undersensitivity or oversensitivity to noise, smell, taste, light, touch, or movement • Implementing structured and systematic programmes for developing the child's gross or fine motor skills • Eliciting relevant information regarding the child's eating, drinking or sleeping irregularities • Structuring the classroom environment to reduce distractions • Securing the child's attention before issuing instructions or engaging in conversation • Providing structures that assist the child in understanding the duration of tasks • Making the links between different tasks clear to the child • Direct and clear teaching of identified skills
Implications of general learning disabilities	
Mild general learning disability Delayed conceptual development, slow speech and language development, limited ability to generalise, limited attention span, and poor retention ability. A number of children may exhibit poor adaptive behaviour, inappropriate or immature personal behaviour, low self-esteem, emotional disturbance, and poor fine or gross motor co-ordination.	Moderate general learning disability Impaired development and learning ability in acquiring skills in relation to language, communication, social and personal development, motor co-ordination, basic literacy and numeracy, mobility, and leisure and aesthetic pursuits.
Severe to profound general learning disability Severe impairment in the ability to function in respect of a basic self-awareness and an awareness of the environment. The promotion of skills in relation to perceptual and cognitive development, language and communication, self-care, fine and gross motor abilities and social and personal development requires particular attention.	

A range of publications is available to assist teachers in mediating the curriculum for children with ASDs. The Draft Curriculum Guidelines for Teachers of Students with General Learning Disabilities published by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (2002) are particularly useful when planning children's education programmes. A CD entitled Autistic Spectrum Disorder: A Teacher's Toolkit and a video for parents entitled Autism: An Introduction developed through a North/South initiative were distributed to all schools in 2005. Autistic Spectrum Disorders: A Guide to Classroom Practice (Autism Working Group, 2002b) was also distributed to schools. Recently a cross-boarder professional exchange initiative, co-ordinated by the Special Education Support Service (SESS) published Opening the Spectrum: Insights into Working with Pupils on the Autistic Spectrum and this is available on the SESS website at www.sess.ie. These resources provide practical advice and guidance for teachers and parents in meeting the needs of children with ASDs.

A co-ordinated approach to curriculum planning and implementation is fundamental to ensuring continuity in and consolidation of children's learning and teaching. It is also important that school policies and procedures consider and refer to the particular needs of children with ASDs. Individualised planning is a key component of children's learning and teaching programmes. Parents, available multi-disciplinary personnel and, where possible, the child with ASD can be included in this process. Referring to Guidelines on the Individual Education Plan Process recently published by the National Council for Special Education (2006) is useful in planning for individual children's needs.

Children with ASDs may become anxious during unstructured periods of the school day such as recess periods. Creating buddy-systems, organising and monitoring structured games and activities and providing opportunities for children to engage in activities of their choice during these periods can assist in reducing children's anxiety. Children with ASDs benefit greatly from being included with their non-ASD peers during curricular and social activities. It is essential that inclusion opportunities are carefully and deliberately planned and that reverse inclusion opportunities are also provided.

Monitoring children's progress in curricular areas can be achieved through the use of a range of formal and informal assessment procedures. A selection can be made as appropriate from assessment strategies such as teacher-observation, homework, teacher-devised tests, diagnostic tests, criterion-referenced tests, norm-referenced standardised tests, checklists, summative assessment, curriculum profiles, retention of samples of children's work, photographic records,

TEACHING APPROACHES

A range of teaching approaches may be used in implementing education programmes for children with ASDs. Approaches used in implementing the Primary School Curriculum such as direct-teaching, modeling, prompting, task-analysis, task repetition scaffolding, activity learning, experiential learning and collaborative learning may be effectively used with children with ASDs. A range of ASD-specific approaches has been developed and a selection of the most commonly used approaches is detailed at Table 2. below. A decision to use a particular approach or combination of approaches should be based on the individual needs of each child and be concerned with furthering the holistic development of the child.

As children develop, they become less reliant on visual information for learning and teachers rely less on visual methods and more on verbal methods in their teaching (White and Worth, 2006). However children with ASDs require visual support throughout their lives in order for them to meaningfully engage in activities. Temple Grandin, an adult with ASDs explains that she thinks in pictures and that words are as a second language to her (Grandin, 1995). Reconciling the strong visual learning modality of children with ASDs with the auditorily-based environment of classrooms is critical to the meaningful engagement of children in curricular activities (Hodgdon, 1995). The use of visual schedules and checklists, labeling children's personal spaces and belongings, labeling the location of objects and areas where specific activities take place, clearly delineating areas of the classroom in association with the activities that occur in each area and utilising concrete materials assist in engaging children in curricular tasks.

PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

Jordan and Powell (1995) observe that the education of a child with ASD 'can neither start nor stop when the school bell rings' (p.140). Children with ASDs require consistent support within school and home environments in order to make optimal educational progress and avail of opportunities to practice acquired skills in a range of different contexts. Involving parents and families of children with ASDs in children's education programmes optimises and enhances children's learning and teaching opportunities.